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SIPDIS

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y ((ADDING CAPTION & PASSING INSTRUCTIONS))

SENSITIVE

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: EAID ECON SENV KBIO KWBG IS

SUBJECT: JUMP STARTING PALESTINIAN-ISRAELI COOPERATION ON WATER

REF: A. A. 2006 TEL AVIV 4741

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11. (U) This is a joint cable of the Embassy in Tel Aviv and the Consulate General in Jerusalem.

12. (SBU) Summary: In the wake of the formation of Prime Minister Salam Fayyad's Palestinian Authority, the U.S.-Palestinian-Israeli Trilateral Water Working Group (TWWG) met on July 19 for the first time in almost two years. Discussions centered around two issues: 1) the emergency water needs of the Palestinians; and 2) the need for longer term joint strategic planning to help ensure adequate water supplies for the future. The Palestinian team focused most of their comments on the emergency needs, noting that many WB/G water projects have been awaiting approval in the bilateral Joint Water Committee for up to several years. The Israeli team, while acknowledging the immediate Palestinians needs, also noted the need for a more strategic focus on the longer term needs to help ensure adequate, sustainable water supplies for the future. The TWWG agreed to hold a working level meeting in three weeks to follow up on both the immediate and longer term issues. Both the Palestinian and Israeli teams urged the USG to re-start its substantial water sector assistance program, which, until it was put on hold when Hamas took over the PA, had done an outstanding job in improving Palestinian access to water and improving Palestinian management of its water resources. By all measures, this TWWG meeting provided an important jump start to what had been a dynamic and important mechanism for supporting Israeli-Palestinian cooperation on water issues. End summary.

Background and Introduction

13. (SBU) The TWWG was established under the 1995 Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement to support the work of the bilateral Israeli-Palestinian Joint Water Committee (JWC) and assist the parties to implement the agreement's water provisions. Dr. Charles Lawson, NEA Senior Advisor for

Science and Technology, leads the U.S. team (which includes Embassy, ConGen and USAID officers), Eng. Fadel Ka,awash, Director, Palestinian Water Authority (PWA) leads the Palestinian team, and Dr. Uri Shani, Director, Israeli National Water and Sewage Authority (INWSA) leads the Israeli team. Up until March 2006 when Hamas took over the PA, the TWWG had met on average two to three times a year since 1995.

The TWWG last met on September 22, 2005 (a February 2006 meeting was canceled when Hamas won the Palestinian elections). Over the years, the TWWG proved itself to be a very useful and productive mechanism for facilitating progress on the USAID water sector assistance program for the Palestinians and facilitating discussions on broader water issues between senior Israeli and Palestinian water officials, even when there was little or no dialogue between the political leaders (such as during the second Intifada).

Opening Remarks

¶4. (SBU) In his opening remarks, U.S. Chair Lawson emphasized the USG's desire in restarting the TWWG mechanism to support Israeli-Palestinian cooperation on water issues. He noted that it is in the interests of all the three TWWG parties to do what they can in the water sector to bolster President Abbas, PM Fayyad, and the Palestinian Authority during this crucial initial period of the new PA. In that regard, Lawson asked the Palestinian and Israeli teams to work together to develop a list of emergency water sector needs and actions that could be taken by one or more of the TWWG parties (and other donors) that would have immediate, positive, on-the-ground impacts for Palestinian populations. Lawson also noted that it would be useful for the two parties to provide the U.S. with a list of the longer range water sector needs (i.e. larger water infrastructure projects) so that the USG would better understand the parties, longer-term priority needs. In their opening remarks, PWA Director Ka,awash and INWSA Director Shani both welcomed the opportunity to re-start the TWWG and to work with the USG again in the water sector for the Palestinians. They urged the USG to re-invigorate its substantial water sector assistance program to help ensure that Palestinian water needs are met.

Palestinian Water Needs

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¶5. (SBU) Ka,awash reported that the PWA and the INWSA had cooperated informally over the last year and a half to address emergency water needs in the West Bank and Gaza. (Note: During the Hamas-led government, INWSA had GOI approval to engage with the PWA on an emergency basis to address humanitarian needs. Given the many emergency Palestinian water needs, this led to frequent PWA-INWSA contact. However, no formal JWC meetings were held during that time. End note.) Ka'awash explained that the PWA had approximately 100 water projects still pending Israeli approval in the JWC - 90 percent of those being small-scale pipe projects to be completed in the span of two or three weeks. Although he praised INWSA-PWA's informal cooperation during the last year and a half, Ka,awash noted that donor countries have already committed funds to numerous WB/G projects that are awaiting Israeli approval.

¶6. (SBU) In terms of larger projects, Ka'awash emphasized the importance of re-starting the Hebron wastewater treatment project, which the USG had put on hold when Hamas came to power. He also encouraged a joint INWSA-PWA effort to build a wastewater treatment plant at the Wadi Nar (also known as Wadi Kidron) sewage drain, located between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, and requested USAID assistance in its construction. He noted that approximately 15-20 million cubic meters of untreated sewage - emanating from both Israeli and Palestinian sources - is

put into the wadi annually (see Ref A for background). Regarding Gaza, Ka'awash said that, as a result of the lack of modern wastewater treatment facilities, the coastal aquifer has been exposed to effluent. He asked that Israeli authorities allow shipments of pipes and pumps to pass into Gaza to be used in PWA projects such as the Northern Gaza Water Treatment Plant (see Ref B). Ka'awash also requested that the Israelis turn over the files on the wells in the former settlement areas of Gaza so that the Palestinians could properly utilize them. When queried, Ka'awash said that PWA offices in Gaza operate free of Hamas involvement and interference. He went on to note that Hamas never tried to interfere with PWA operations in the West Bank or Gaza after it took power in March 2006.

¶17. (SBU) Ka'awash expressed his gratitude to USAID for the on-going Beni Naim water project, which is scheduled for completion by mid-2008. With the completion of this project (the last of the major USG water supply projects in the southern West Bank), the PWA will be able to supply potable water to the homes of an estimated 700,000 Hebron-area Palestinians, and Ka'awash described the project as essential to water delivery in the southern West Bank. Ka'awash noted by mid-2008, when the Beni Naim project is completed, the basic water needs (approximately 100-150 liters per person per day) of most of the Palestinian population in the southern West Bank will be met. Ka'awash stressed, however, that the water shortages in the northern West Bank were much more serious and the needs yet unmet. He asked his Israeli partners for help in providing for the water needs of Palestinians in the northern West Bank. (Note: The water problems in the northern West Bank are long standing. The Israelis use most of the water in the aquifer underlying the northern West Bank and, thus, are reluctant to allow Palestinians greater access to the aquifer, since that would mean less water for Israeli consumers. End note.)

----- Israeli Perspectives

¶18. (SBU) INWSA Director Shani noted that water resources are scarce in Israel as they are in the entire region, making it difficult to provide the Palestinians with significantly more water from existing sources. The Israelis argue that the only viable long term solution to regional water scarcity is the development of sea water desalination plants. Shani emphasized that the Israelis have been responding to Palestinians water needs based on requests from the PWA, and he noted that Mekorot (the Israeli water company) increased the quantity of water provided to Palestinians from 43 to 46 million cubic meters over the last year. The Israeli team stressed that the two parties need to develop a long range strategic water plan to ensure adequate and sustainable water supplies for the future. Otherwise, they would always be dealing with short term emergency needs. Ka'awash agreed that desalination was a good solution for the long term, but he added that towns in the northern West Bank require drinking water now - not in the five or so years it would take to construct desalination plants. (Note: While the need for new water sources is important, Palestinian water

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officials have been reluctant to engage in detailed discussions about the construction of a sea water desalination plant to serve the Palestinians, except in the context of permanent status negotiations. They believe that to do otherwise might prejudice Palestinian negotiations on rights to the existing water resources in the West Bank aquifers, whenever they might get back to the negotiating table in the future. End note.)

----- Wrap Up and Follow Up

¶19. (SBU) In concluding the discussion, all three TWWG

partners agreed on the need to tackle the issues of short term, immediate needs and longer term needs simultaneously in parallel discussions. TWWG Chair Lawson requested that the Palestinian and Israeli teams meet bilaterally as soon as possible to come up with a mutually agreed list of immediate, emergency needs and to begin discussions on the longer term needs. Lawson proposed that a working level TWWG meeting be held in three weeks - after the parties meet bilaterally - so that the Palestinian and Israeli teams could give the emergency needs list to the USG and also discuss longer term needs.

¶10. (SBU) Comments: With its July 19 meeting, the TWWG got off to a good start after an almost two year hiatus. Both the Israelis and Palestinians expressed satisfaction with the meeting's outcomes and emphasized their commitment to work together on water. Both parties also were very clear in their desire that the USG take on the role it previously played as the major donor in the Palestinian water and sanitation sector. End comments.

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